

Drowning in a Tidal Wave of Trash

by Steve Silverman

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In the disaster film epic "The Poseidon Adventure," ship's captain Leslie Nielsen is summoned to the bridge to view a sonar showing a 200-foot-high wall of water bearing down on a collision course with his ill-fated vessel.

"Oh, my God!" is about all he can offer before the tsunami-induced wave turns his passenger liner upside down.

A tsunami of a different sort is about to hit Montgomery County – in the form of a rising tide of garbage that is already overwhelming the County's incinerator. Unless we can get a grip on our refuse problem, our County will either have to become a major exporter of trash to other jurisdictions or folks will start choosing up sides in a fight over whether we ought to build a new incinerator.

In 1992, Montgomery County approved the construction of its incinerator, also known as the Resource Recovery Facility, in Dickerson, in the far western part of the County, after a bitter battle with environmentalists and the surrounding community. In the end, a deal was struck. The incinerator would go forward and the County would aggressively pursue a goal of recycling 50 percent of our collective solid waste.

Nine years later, the County recycling rate is stuck at 37 percent. Although single-family residential recycling comes in at 52 percent, multifamily buildings and commercial recycling lag far behind. The commercial recycling rate is of particular concern as our businesses generate 47% of all county waste but recycle a mere 31% of what they generate.

Our incinerator was designed with three burners. The idea was that only two would operate at any one time while the third was idle for repair and maintenance. Instead, all three are running all the time –

and we are bumping up against our annual output limit of 657,000 tons.

This is bad for the environment, and bad for our budget. That's why I've proposed two significant new recycling initiatives: a ban on the disposal of cardboard by residents and businesses – the first in the region – and the full roll-out of a successful residential recycling pilot program which would distribute over 100,000 large-capacity, wheeled containers for residential recycling, almost five times the amount currently in use.

Montgomery County's most recent waste generation and composition data reveals that an estimated 50,000 tons of cardboard are being disposed of as waste.

Banning the disposal of cardboard will not only reduce the amount of materials being burned by the incinerator, but - if it is as successful as our yard trim disposal ban- will boost our recycling to 41%.

The County implemented the yard trim disposal ban in 1994. Prior to the ban, 139,000 tons of yard trimmings and grass clippings were disposed of as trash each year. Since the ban we have been recovering 90% of these materials from the waste stream.

While ours would be the first cardboard disposal ban in this region, bans have been implemented in many other communities such as San Diego County, CA; Seattle, WA; Dane County, WI; Orange County, NC; Halifax, Nova Scotia; and the entire State of Massachusetts.

Commonly, the ban is enforced at the transfer station where trained staff visually inspect a certain number of delivered loads. Haulers are subject to a penalty for any loads in which cardboard appears to exceed a set percentage. They are likely to pass that penalty back through to the violator, creating an opportunity for the hauler and their customer to work together to avoid future penalties.

This is just one step we can take to more forcefully encourage the commercial sector to get serious about recycling. By the end of April, the Council's Office of Legislative Oversight will issue a report which

will highlight disposal bans and other strategies that communities across the nation have found to be effective at increasing the commercial recycling rate.

Based on the resounding success of a pilot program, the County Executive's recommended FY05 budget proposes the purchase and distribution of 52,000 large-capacity, wheeled recyclables containers. These "wheeled toters" increased mixed paper collection between 40% and 95%. I would more than double that number to fully implement this program in the coming fiscal year. The long term costs of our lagging recycling rate are far greater than the one-time \$11 residential solid waste fee charge that will buy the additional wheeled toters that I have proposed.

There wasn't much Leslie Nielsen could do about the wave that hit the U.S.S. Poseidon. Montgomery County has a little more time – if we act now to bolster our recycling and head off the need for a new, inevitably controversial, incinerator. The clock is ticking.

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